

\$1B in road bucks driven into Vermont

Brattleboro Reformer
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WASHINGTON -- Vermont will receive more than \$1 billion in federal transportation funding over five years, as outlined in a mammoth highway bill expected to be finalized today. The transportation reauthorization bill will infuse \$100 million into Western Vermont, from Bennington to the Quebec border, said Sen. James Jeffords, I-Vt., one the "big eight" Senate and House lawmakers to negotiate the bill over the last three years.

"Every region of Vermont will benefit from this legislation," said Jeffords, the ranking member of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee.

Vermont will receive \$175 million a year through 2009, an increase of \$50 million a year over the last bill. In addition, Vermont's small town bridge fund will receive \$30 million and \$25 million will be used to improve its interstates. And the Missisquoi Bay Bridge will be completed with \$18 million.

"This highway bill makes the biggest federal investment in Vermont's road and bridges in history," Jeffords said. "It will make Vermont's roads safer and less congested and bring new jobs and resources to our state for years to come."

The highway bill stalled last year after the Senate sought to authorize more funds than the White House preferred. Jeffords is one of four key senators to negotiate the legislation with the White House and both chambers of Congress.

Thousands of specific transportation projects in Vermont and around the nation will be made public today, after a conference committee composed of House and Senate members finalizes their negotiations before the month-long August recess.

"We've done well. The congressional staff did well down there," said John LaBarge, who works in policy and planning for the state Agency of Transportation.

Ken Connolly, minority staff director on the Environment and Public Works Committee, said Jeffords, who announced earlier this year he will retire at the end of next year, had spent much of his last term in the Senate fighting to preserve transportation funding for bike paths, sidewalks and other alternative transportation programs that had received their first substantial funding in the 1990s.

"Through the last three years of doing this, there were a lot of people attacking that ... framework" and insisting that federal transportation dollars be dedicated to highway building and maintenance, Connolly said.

Typical of Jeffords work was inclusion in the bill of the "Safe Routes to School" program, in which money will be set aside for communities to

build bike paths and make safety improvements designed to make it easier and safer for children to get to school "under their own power," Connolly said.

Connolly said he had devoted about half his time for most of the last three years to the transportaion bill, working closely with Jeffords' staff member Jeff Squires, a former Vermont deputy secretary of transportation.

After Squires left for a consulting job in January, and work on the bill intensified, Connolly said the measure took up to 80 percent of his long days. He said he had been showering at the office and hadn't made it home for his three young children's 8:30 bedtime in more than a month.

"We were getting desparate for a bill after all this time. It was pretty tough for people who have families." Now, Connolly said, his plan was to return to Vermont for a month of relaxing and riding his bike "over those covered bridges we're going to protect."

The Associated Press contributed to this report.